

Until I knew

—"My heart's a secret under your tongue

Crying forever, Deep in your eyes."

Reeve Carney – New For You

Tui

The taxi moved through Bangkok's Saturday night like we were the only passengers in the city. Lego was pressed against my side, his head on my shoulder, his whole body so completely surrendered to exhaustion that I wasn't sure he was still conscious. The ice pack we'd grabbed from the venue had long since melted, soaking through my shirt where his knee rested against me. I didn't move to adjust it. Moving would require disturbing him, and he needed whatever rest these few minutes could provide.

Outside the window, the city scrolled past in its usual chaos of neon and motion. Food vendors packing up for the night. Couples walking toward clubs that were just beginning their evening surge. The ordinary rhythm of a Saturday, completely indifferent to the extraordinary thing that had just happened in a university theater.

I couldn't stop seeing it.

Lego on that stage, red fabric moving like something liquid, his body telling a story that words would never capture. The collapse—not a fall, but a surrender, his arms wrapped around himself in a gesture so protective it had made my chest ache. The rising. The hand pressed to his heart at the end, surviving the emptiness.

I'd watched performances before. Appreciated technique. Admired skill. But I'd never felt my chest crack open just from watching someone dance. That's what love did, I was learning. It made other people's pain your own. It made their triumphs feel like survival. It made everything more intense, more real, more impossible to look away from.

"Almost there." I said quietly.

His hand found mine in the space between us. I held on. Let my thumb trace slow circles across his knuckles. Felt the particular way his fingers threaded through mine—familiar now, after months of learning each other, but still capable of making my chest do something complicated.

I looked out the window. We were approaching Lego's building—the apartment where he'd built his fortress of soft things, where he'd created a world designed to keep cruelty out and tenderness in. I'd been here before, for the birthday preparation, for brief visits. But tonight felt different.

Tonight I was staying.

"Can you walk?" I asked softly.

Lego stirred, lifting his head from my shoulder. His makeup was smudged—the gold liner bleeding into the shadows under his eyes, the shimmer on his cheekbones dulled by sweat and tears. He looked exhausted and beautiful and completely, vulnerably real.

"I think so." he said.

He couldn't.

We made it from the taxi to the building entrance before his knee buckled. I caught him automatically—my arms finding their place around his waist, his weight settling against me with the trust of someone who had stopped trying to carry everything alone.

"Sorry—" he started.

"Don't." I shifted my grip, supporting him properly. "Lean on me. That's what I'm here for."

We navigated the hallway slowly, Lego's arm around my shoulders, my arm around his waist. Each step was careful, deliberate. I could feel the tension in his body—the way he was trying not to put too much weight on the injured leg, the small sounds he swallowed every time he had to use it anyway.

His apartment door opened into warmth and softness. The space was exactly as I remembered—plush surfaces everywhere, stuffed animals arranged on shelves, pastel colors creating an atmosphere that felt like being held. The Alice in Wonderland tea set was displayed on a small table near the window, the cups I'd given him catching the lamplight with their whimsical illustrations.

I helped him to the couch, settling him against the cushions with the particular care of someone handling something precious.

"Stay here," I said. "I'll get what you need."

The kitchen was small but well-organized. I found the ice pack in the freezer, wrapped it in a towel from the counter. Found the kettle and filled it, recognizing the tea canister Lego kept on the shelf—the same jasmine blend he'd brought to the studio so many times. I prepared everything the way I'd watched him do it: careful measurements, proper temperature, the patience required for leaves to unfurl.

When I returned to the living room, Lego was watching me. His eyes tracked my movements as I knelt in front of him, carefully positioning the ice pack against his knee. His expression carried something I couldn't quite name—gratitude, maybe,

but also wonder. Like he still wasn't quite sure this was real.

"How does your knee feel?" I asked. "Scale of one to ten."

He hesitated. Just for a moment—a heartbeat of consideration that told me everything about how he usually handled this kind of question.

"Seven," he said finally. "Maybe eight."

"You told me it was prevention. Just prevention."

His eyes dropped to the ice pack, avoiding mine.

"I lied."

The confession hung between us—simple words carrying enormous weight. I waited, giving him space to continue.

"The choreography wasn't mine," he said, his voice quiet in the soft light of his apartment. "And I—" He paused, swallowing. "I learned the whole piece in seven days. Twelve-hour rehearsals. Sometimes more."

Seven days. Twelve hours a day. The physical demands of that kind of intensive learning, on a body that was already pushed to its limits from regular classes and rehearsals and the multiple part-time jobs he worked to stay busy enough to not feel alone.

"My body was screaming at me to stop," he continued, still not meeting my eyes. "Every morning I woke up hurting. Every night I went to sleep hurting worse. But I couldn't say no. She needed someone. The show needed someone. And I—"

"And you always say yes when people need you."

He looked up at me then, something vulnerable in his expression.

"I don't know how to be another way."

I thought about what I knew of his history. Parents who had fought to avoid caring for him. A childhood spent making himself useful so people would let him stay. Years of learning that his value was measured in what he could give, not in who he was.

His perpetual sunshine wasn't just a personality. It was a survival mechanism. A way of making himself easy to love, easy to keep, because somewhere deep down he believed that if he was ever a burden, people would leave.

"You don't have to be okay all the time," I said, my voice steady despite the ache in my chest. "Not with me. Not anymore."

"What if you see all the not-okay parts?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

"What if you decide I'm too much trouble?"

I reached up and cupped his face in my hands—the way I'd learned to, the way that made him go still and present, focused on just me.

"Then I'll be here proving you wrong," I said. "Every day. Until you believe it."

A tear slipped down his cheek. I caught it with my thumb.

"I don't know how to stop," he admitted. "Being okay. Performing it. I've been doing it so long I don't remember what else there is."

"We'll figure it out together. That's what this is—learning who we are with each other. Not the performance version. The real one."

He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against mine. We stayed like that for a long moment—breathing the same air, existing in the same space, not needing to speak. The kettle whistled from the kitchen, breaking the stillness.

"Tea," I said. "And then we're taking care of that knee properly."

The bathroom was small but comfortable, decorated in the same soft aesthetic as the rest of the apartment. I ran the bath while Lego sat on the closed toilet lid, watching me with the particular attention of someone who wasn't used to being cared for this way. The hot water steamed, filling the room with warmth.

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"I know." I tested the temperature with my wrist. "I want to."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it keeps being true."

I helped him out of his clothes—the borrowed things he'd worn to the dinner after the performance, none of them quite fitting right. The costume had been spectacular, but these ordinary clothes made him look young. Small. Real in a way that performance polish couldn't capture.

The bruising on his knee was worse than I'd expected. Purple and yellow spreading across the joint, the evidence of what pushing through pain actually looked like. I'd seen bodies pushed to their limits before—in the tattoo chair, in the gym, in all the ways people tested their physical boundaries. But this was different.

This was the body of someone I loved, damaged in the pursuit of art.

"Into the water," I said, keeping my voice gentle. "Slowly."

He lowered himself into the bath with careful movements, hissing slightly as the

heat hit his aching muscles. But once he was settled, his face relaxed—the particular expression of someone whose body was finally getting what it needed.

"Better?" I asked.

"Better."

I sat on the floor beside the tub, my back against the wall, close enough to reach him if he needed anything. The steam rose around us, creating a cocoon of warmth and quiet.

"I keep thinking about the performance," he said after a while. "About what I did up there."

"Tell me."

"The choreography was someone else's story. She created it—the movements, the sequences, all of it. I just learned the steps." He was staring at the water, watching his own distorted reflection. "But when I danced it, I filled it with my own things. My own grief."

"I could see that." I reached over and took his hand, not caring that mine was getting wet. "That's what made it powerful. The movements might have been hers, but the emotion was yours."

"My sister," he said quietly. "I was thinking about her. During the collapse, when I was curled on the stage. I was remembering what it felt like when she died. When my parents stopped even pretending to care about me because they'd only ever really cared about her."

The words landed in my chest like stones. I'd known pieces of his story—the sister with the heart condition, the parents who had fought to avoid custody of him, the years of being passed between families that didn't want him. But hearing it now, in this context, connected to what I'd witnessed on that stage—

"I didn't plan it," he continued. "I was just supposed to do the choreography. But when I got to that moment—the one where the dancer falls and can't get up—I felt it. Actually felt it. All those years of pretending to be okay, and suddenly I was on stage in front of hundreds of people, and I couldn't pretend anymore."

"You let them see you."

"Yeah." He looked at me, eyes wet. "And they didn't look away."

"Of course they didn't." I squeezed his hand. "What you gave them was real. People recognize real."

He was quiet for a moment, processing. Then: "The standing ovation. I keep thinking

about that. All those people, on their feet, clapping. For something that came from the worst parts of me."

"Not the worst parts. The truest parts. There's a difference."

The water was starting to cool. I reached over and added more hot water, watching it swirl and steam.

"Thank you," Lego said softly. "For being here. For all of it."

"I told you. I'm not going anywhere."

We got ready for sleep in stages.

First the practical things: draining the bath, helping Lego dry off, re-wrapping his knee with fresh compression. Then finding clothes—I'd brought nothing, hadn't planned for this, but Lego's apartment was full of oversized things he'd collected. An old band shirt. Sweatpants that were too big even for him.

"The bed's in there," he said, gesturing toward the bedroom. "I can take the couch —"

"You're not sleeping on the couch with that knee."

"But you're the guest—"

"I'm your—" I stopped, suddenly uncertain what word to use. Boyfriend felt too simple. Partner felt too formal. Something that required more words than a single label could contain.

"You're my something," he finished, his smile small but real. "My person. That's what you are."

"Then as your person, I'm telling you: you're sleeping in your bed. With your knee elevated. And I'm staying with you."

He didn't argue further. We navigated to the bedroom together—a space as soft as the rest of the apartment, full of pillows and plush things. The bed was bigger than I'd expected, piled with blankets in pastel colors.

"Which side?" I asked.

"I usually sleep in the middle," he admitted. "But for you—left or right?"

"Right. But wherever you're comfortable."

We arranged ourselves with the particular awkwardness of two people who hadn't shared a bed before. Pillows adjusted. Blankets distributed. Lego's knee propped on a cushion to keep it elevated. Then he curled against my side—face pressing into

my neck, body fitting into the curve of me like a puzzle piece finding its place. The weight of him was warm and real, his breathing slowing as the exhaustion finally claimed him.

I lay there in the darkness of his room, surrounded by the soft things he'd collected to keep the world out.

This was different from anything I'd known before.

I thought about my own history—the relationship that had broken me years ago, the one that had made me build walls so high I couldn't see over them. The particular pain of being hurt by someone you trusted, of having vulnerability weaponized against you. I'd sworn never to risk that again. Had kept everyone at arm's length for years, convincing myself that safety was more important than connection.

But this didn't feel like risk.

This felt like home.

Lego's hand found mine in the darkness, not grasping, just resting there. A connection that required no effort. I listened to his breathing deepen, felt his body relax completely against mine. He trusted me with his unconscious self. With his vulnerability, his pain, his morning-after face that no one else got to see.

That was everything. That was more than I'd ever expected to have.

I closed my eyes.

And for once, sleep came easily.

Sunday Morning

I woke before he did.

The light through the curtains was soft—late morning, probably, the particular gold of Bangkok filtering through lavender fabric. Lego was still curled against my chest, his breathing slow and peaceful, the exhaustion of yesterday still visible in the shadows under his eyes.

I didn't move. Didn't want to disturb this moment.

I lay there watching him—the slack peace of his sleeping face, the way his hand was still loosely holding mine, the way his body molded against me like it had always belonged there. His hair was loose around his face, the natural shorter length that existed under the extensions. Without the stage makeup, without the performance polish, he looked young. Real.

I thought about all the mornings I'd woken up alone.

All the years of keeping people at arm's length because it was safer. All the times I'd convinced myself that closeness meant risk, that vulnerability meant pain, that the walls I'd built were necessary for survival. But this—this quiet morning with someone I loved breathing beside me—this didn't feel like any of those things.

It just felt like beginning.

Lego stirred. His eyelids fluttered, consciousness returning in stages—first a shift in breathing, then a small sound, then his eyes opening to find mine.

"You're staring." he said, voice rough with sleep.

"I'm appreciating."

"Same thing."

"Not even close."

His smile was soft, intimate, the kind that existed only in private moments like this. He stretched slightly, wincing when the movement pulled at his knee.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Stiff. Less swollen, I think." He shifted carefully, testing the joint. "Better than yesterday."

"That's something."

"That's something." he agreed.

We moved through the morning slowly, without hurry. The bathroom was a negotiation—which sink, who needed the mirror more, the particular choreography of two people learning to share space during the unglamorous hours of the day. I watched him brush his teeth, watched him examine his face in the mirror with that particular attention he brought to getting ready.

"I look terrible." he announced.

"You look beautiful."

"You're biased."

"Doesn't make me wrong."

He laughed—small, genuine—and the sound of it made something warm bloom in my chest.

Breakfast was another negotiation. His kitchen was well-stocked with things I didn't know how to cook—ingredients for dishes more complicated than my usual



repertoire.

"I'll make something." he offered.

"You'll sit down and rest your knee. I'll figure it out."

"P'Tui—"

"I have never in my life burned eggs. Today will not be the day I start."

He sat at his small kitchen table, watching me navigate his space. I found eggs, found rice left over from some previous meal, found vegetables I could cut into something resembling a proper breakfast.

"You're very determined." he observed.

"I'm taking care of you. That's the plan for today."

"All day?"

"All day. Tomorrow too. However long you need."

His expression softened into something I couldn't quite name. Gratitude, maybe. Wonder. The particular look of someone who wasn't used to being on the receiving end of care.

"I have another performance tonight." he said quietly.

"I know."

"The second one is always harder. The first time has the energy of debut. The second time—" He paused, looking down at his hands. "The second time, you know exactly how much it costs."

"I'll be there. Same seat as yesterday. Same face for you to find in the crowd."

"And after?"

"After, I'll be backstage. Waiting. That's the only promise I can make—but I make it completely."

After breakfast, I insisted on checking his knee properly. The swelling had gone down overnight, but the bruising had deepened—purple and yellow spreading across the joint like watercolors bleeding into each other. I examined it carefully, noting where the tension was worst, where pressure made him wince.

"This needs rest." I said.

"I know."

"I mean actual rest. Not performing-through-pain rest. The kind where you stop pushing and let your body heal."

"After tonight." His voice was soft but certain. "I can't stop before. The performance needs me."

"What about what you need?"

"I need to finish what I started." He met my eyes. "And I need you to understand that. This isn't about hurting myself. It's about—" He paused, searching for words. "It's about proving something. That I can do hard things. That I can show up even when it hurts."

I thought about that. About what I knew of his history—the years of being passed between parents who didn't want him, the constant pressure to be easy, to be light, to never need anything from anyone.

"You don't have to prove that to me," I said. "I already know you can do hard things. I watched you do the hardest thing last night."

"Not to you." His smile was small, a little sad. "To me. I need to prove it to myself."

I wrapped his knee with fresh compression, applied ice one more time. Helped him into his extensions—the elaborate process of attaching them, styling them into the pigtails he preferred for casual days.

"The exhibition," he said as I worked. "Hong's final day. We should be there."

"We will be. There's time."

"And then the performance."

"And then the performance."

"And then—" He looked up at me, something uncertain in his expression. "Will you stay again? Tonight?"

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead, lingering there for a moment.

"As long as you want me to."

We were almost ready to leave when the doorbell rang. Lego pulled away from the mirror where he'd been checking his appearance one last time. I heard him talking to someone in the hallway—a delivery person, it sounded like—and then footsteps returning.

He came back into the room carrying the largest bouquet of sunflowers I'd ever seen. There must have been twenty of them, maybe more. The brilliant yellow blooms caught the morning light streaming through his windows, their dark centers

like eyes looking back at us. They were wrapped in simple brown paper, tied with twine, the particular aesthetic of a high-end florist who understood that sometimes simplicity was its own statement.

Lego's face was transformed—the particular brightness that wasn't performance but genuine joy. He was smiling as he looked at the card tucked among the stems.

I watched him read it, his expression shifting through stages I couldn't quite name. His face was completely bare of makeup now; I could see his moles and freckles. He was wearing his hair extensions in two pigtails, an oversized gray sweatshirt, and shorts that showed his scraped knees. The contrast between the performance creature from last night and this morning-after version was stark.

But both were beautiful. Both were him.

"Who are they from?" I asked, already suspecting the answer.

Lego looked up from the card, his eyes bright.

"William," he said softly. "He sent them to congratulate me. For the performance."

William. The artist in the glass tower. The recluse who hadn't left his apartment in years, who had pushed Est away so thoroughly that the damage had taken months to heal. The man Lego had been visiting every week, bringing flowers, maintaining connection when no one else could.

I thought about what it meant that William had sent sunflowers. That he'd known when the performance was, had made the effort to arrange delivery, had reached out in the only way his particular limitations allowed.

"What does the card say?" I asked.

Lego held it up, reading aloud:

"For my sunshine boy—

I couldn't be there in person. You know why. But I was thinking about you. I know how hard you've been working. I know what this performance cost you. And I know you were magnificent, because that's what you are.

The empty seat isn't empty. I'm there in the ways I can be.

Don't let me be the only flower in your life anymore. But know that I'm still rooting for you, always.

—W"

Lego's eyes were wet by the time he finished reading. I crossed to him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, careful of the massive bouquet between us.

"He remembered," Lego said quietly. "He actually remembered."

"He cares about you. Even from his glass tower."

"I know. I just—" He paused, sniffing. "I spent so long being his only connection to the outside world. And now—" He looked up at me. "Now I'm not alone in caring for him anymore. Everything is different."

"Different good or different scary?"

"Both." His smile was trembling at the edges. "Everything important is both."

I helped him find a vase for the sunflowers—actually, three vases, because there were too many to fit in one. We arranged them around his apartment, their bright yellow faces turning toward the window like they were searching for the sun they were named after.

Heliotropism, I thought. The way certain plants follow the light. The way Lego had always oriented himself toward warmth, toward brightness, toward the people who needed him. But now I was here. Now he had people who would follow him in return.

"We should go." I said finally, when the flowers were arranged and the morning had stretched as long as it could.

"The exhibition."

"The exhibition. And then your warm-up. And then—"

"And then everything that comes after." He finished.

He looked around his apartment one last time—at the sunflowers brightening every corner, at the Alice in Wonderland cups on their shelf, at the soft things that made this space a sanctuary. Then he looked at me, something settled and certain in his expression.

"I'm glad you stayed," he said. "Last night and this morning. All of it."

"I'm glad you let me."

"I was scared to ask. I kept thinking—what if it's too much? What if he decides this is too complicated?"

"You're not too much." I took his face in my hands, the gesture that had become familiar now. "You're exactly enough. You're everything."

He kissed me—soft, unhurried, the kind of kiss that existed between people who knew they had time. Who knew they were building something real.

Then we left together, stepping out into the Sunday morning, the day stretching

ahead of us full of exhibition finales and dance performances and the ordinary miracle of showing up for the people we loved. The sunflowers stayed behind, filling his apartment with yellow light. Evidence of care. Proof that even from the highest towers, love could reach down and touch the people who mattered.

And in my chest, something warm continued to grow—the particular feeling of having found exactly where I was supposed to be.

The university was different on Sunday. Not quieter, exactly—if anything, the final day of the arts festival had drawn the largest crowds, people who had heard about the exhibitions and performances and wanted to see for themselves before everything closed. But there was a different quality to the energy. The anticipation of an ending. The particular intensity that came when time was running out.

Lego's hand was warm in mine as we walked toward the entrance. We'd left his apartment an hour ago—sunflowers in water on his kitchen counter, the Alice in Wonderland tea cups washed and returned to their careful place on the shelf. The morning had been gentle in a way I was still getting used to. Breakfast together. The particular choreography of two people learning to share space. The kiss goodbye that had become a kiss that lingered, that made us almost late.

Now we were here. The final day. The final performance. The final opportunity to be brave together.

"There they are." Lego said, pointing toward the garden at the university entrance.

Hong and Nut were waiting near the fountain—Hong pacing slightly, the particular nervous energy I recognized from the past two days of his exhibition, and Nut standing close enough to be present but not so close as to crowd. They made sense together, I realized. The way Nut's steadiness balanced Hong's anxiety. The way they'd learned to exist in each other's space.

Hong spotted us approaching and waved. As we got closer, I noticed what Lego had probably already observed—Hong was well-dressed again. Properly put together in a way he hadn't been for months before Nut started taking him on actual dates. The messy hair and ripped jeans of his usual aesthetic had given way to something more intentional. Someone was paying attention to his appearance now, and it showed.

"Finally," Hong said when we reached them. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten the time."

"We had a slow morning." Lego said, and there was something in his tone—a warmth, a private joke—that made Hong's ears go pink.

"I don't want to know." Hong muttered.

"Nothing happened," I said. "We just took our time."

"Still don't want to know."

Nut smiled—that easy expression he had when he was watching the people around him find their footing. "Are we eating first? Hong's been anxious since he woke up, and food might help."

"I haven't been—" Hong started.

"You've been pacing for twenty minutes," Nut said gently. "Your sister texted to say she'd be here this afternoon, and you immediately started spiraling about whether your paintings looked different today than they did yesterday."

Hong's jaw worked. Then, quietly: "They could look different. Light changes."

"The paintings are beautiful," Lego said, reaching out to squeeze Hong's arm. "They were beautiful yesterday, they were beautiful the day before, and they'll be beautiful until they take them down."

"You haven't even seen them today."

"I don't need to. I know you."

Something in Hong's expression softened. The anxiety didn't disappear—it never entirely disappeared with Hong—but it eased slightly. Transformed into something more manageable.

"Fine," he said. "Let's eat. But somewhere good. I need comfort food."

"I know just the place." Nut said.

Nut's car was comfortable and well-maintained, the kind of vehicle that spoke of someone who cared about details. We piled in—Lego and I in the back, Hong in the passenger seat, Nut navigating the Sunday traffic with patient efficiency.

The restaurant he chose was a quiet place near the river—not one of the tourist spots that lined the waterfront, but a family-owned establishment tucked into a side street. The kind of place you'd never find unless someone brought you. The kind of place that felt like a secret.

We ordered too much food. That was the consensus, anyway—plates covering the table, dishes we passed back and forth, the particular pleasure of sharing a meal with people you cared about. Hong relaxed incrementally as he ate, the anxiety giving way to something closer to his usual reserved warmth.

Lego was quieter than normal.

I noticed it in stages—the way he picked at his food instead of devouring it, the way

his smiles came a beat too late, the way he kept shifting in his seat like he couldn't get comfortable. The knee brace was invisible under his clothes, but I knew it was there. Knew what it was hiding.

"You okay?" I asked quietly, while Hong and Nut debated the merits of various dessert options.

Lego looked at me with those eyes that always saw too much. "Just thinking about later. The performance."

"Nervous?"

"Always." He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "The second time is harder. You know exactly how much it costs."

"You don't have to—"

"Yes, I do." His voice was gentle but firm. "I promised the choreographer. I promised the department. I promised myself. One more time, and then it's over."

"And then?"

"And then I rest." He reached under the table and found my hand. "I promise. After today, I rest."

I wanted to believe him. Wanted to trust that he would actually stop when the performance was over, that he wouldn't find another reason to push himself, another person who needed him to show up, another way to sacrifice his own wellbeing for someone else's needs.

But Lego had a habit of breaking himself for others. I'd seen it too many times to fully trust his promises.

Still, the promise was something. A starting point. A place we could build from.

"After the performance," I said, "let's do something. Take a break. A mini vacation somewhere."

His face lit up—that particular brightness that made everything feel possible. "Really?"

"Really. Just us. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere you can actually rest without anyone asking you to dance or smile or be anything other than exactly what you are."

"That sounds—" His voice caught. "That sounds perfect."

"Then it's a plan."

We finished lunch with coffee and dessert—a chocolate cake that Hong claimed was

purely for stress relief, a fruit tart that Lego barely touched. The afternoon stretched ahead of us, unhurried, the particular sweetness of time spent with people who didn't need to perform for each other.

We returned to the university around two o'clock. The crowds had grown—families with children, students from other departments, the particular mix of people that accumulated at the end of an arts festival. Hong's exhibition was busier than it had been the day before, strangers clustered around his paintings, actually reading the descriptions, actually having reactions.

We were standing near the entrance to his section when Hong's sister arrived. She was carrying Gavin on her hip—the four-year-old looking slightly overwhelmed by all the people but determined to seem grown-up about it. When she spotted Hong, her face broke into a wide smile.

"There you are," she said, crossing toward us. "I was worried I'd have to search the whole building."

"The building isn't that big, jie."

"Big enough." She set Gavin down, and he immediately ran toward the paintings, his eyes wide with the particular wonder of a child encountering something new.

Then her gaze shifted to me. To Lego. To the way we were standing close together, the way my hand rested on Lego's lower back, the comfortable intimacy that had become second nature.

"Wait," she said, her eyes narrowing with recognition. "I know you. You're the head of the tattoo studio, right? Hong talks about you all the time."

"I—yes. Tui." I offered my hand. "It's nice to meet you properly."

She shook it, but her attention was already shifting, taking in the details I'd become so used to that I'd stopped noticing them. The way Lego leaned into my touch. The way I positioned myself slightly protectively at his side. The particular energy that existed between two people who had stopped pretending.

"Are you two—" She started, then laughed. "Of course you are. I can't believe I didn't notice this before. The way Hong talks about both of you, I should have put it together."

"Jie." Hong said, his tone carrying warning.

"What? It's sweet!" She grinned at Lego. "I'm glad Hong has friends who are happy. It's good for him to be around people who aren't afraid of connection."

Hong's ears went very pink. "Can we not—"



"I'm just saying. It's nice." She looked between me and Lego again. "Very nice."

Lego's smile was shy but pleased. He wasn't used to this, I realized—the casual acceptance, the warmth of being seen as part of a couple. For so long, he'd been William's support system, not someone who had a support system of his own.

"Jie," Hong said again, more insistently this time. "The paintings. Kevin is touching them."

His sister turned to see her son reaching for the frame of "Fortress," his small fingers extended toward the oil paint.

"Kevin! Don't touch!" She hurried toward him, leaving the rest of us in her wake.

Hong sighed, but there was fondness underneath. "She's going to interrogate me later," he muttered. "About you. About Lego. About everything."

"Is that bad?"

"It's—" He paused, considering. "No. Not bad. Just exhausting." He looked at me, his expression shifting to something more serious. "You should make it official, you know."

"What?"

"You and Lego." Hong nodded toward where Lego had wandered—he was crouched near Kevin now, accepting a small origami flower the boy was pressing into his hands. "Make it official. Before someone else steals him away."

I watched Lego with Kevin—the gentle way he accepted the crumpled paper flower, the serious attention he paid to the child's explanation of how he'd made it. The brightness in his face that didn't seem forced at all.

"I'm not worried about that." I said.

"You should still ask him. Properly." Hong's voice was quieter now, more sincere. "He deserves to hear it. To know that what you have is—official. Real. Not just something that exists in private."

The words landed somewhere deep. I thought about all the ways I'd held back. All the times I'd told myself I was protecting Lego by keeping my distance, by maintaining boundaries, by refusing to put a label on what we had. I'd convinced myself it was for his benefit—that he was young, that I was damaged, that defining the relationship would only create pressure. But maybe that was another lie I'd told myself. Another way of running from vulnerability.

"I'll think about it." I said.

"Think fast." Hong's smile was small but genuine. "Before my nephew steals your

boyfriend."

We watched Kavin present Lego with another origami creation—this one meant to be a bird, though it looked more like a crumpled tissue. Lego accepted it with the same gravity he'd shown for the flower, tucking both carefully into his pocket like they were precious things.

Something in my chest expanded. The particular fullness that came from watching someone you loved be gentle with a child. The glimpse of a future I hadn't let myself imagine.

Hong's sister gathered Kavin eventually, promising to return for Lego's five o'clock performance. She hugged Hong tightly, whispered something in his ear that made him duck his head, and then was gone—back into the crowd, back into her own life.

"She's proud of you." I said after she'd left.

"I know." Hong's voice was quiet. "It's—a lot. Having someone be proud."

"It's what you deserve."

He didn't respond to that. Just looked at his paintings on the wall, at the strangers who had stopped to read his descriptions, at the evidence that his soul was being witnessed.

Lego left for warmups at three-thirty.

The parting was harder than I'd expected. He clung to me for a long moment, his face pressed against my chest, his body trembling slightly with nerves or exhaustion or some combination of both.

"I'll be watching," I said into his hair. "The whole time. Look for me if you need to."

"I always need to." He pulled back, his eyes bright. "You're my solid ground."

"And you're my—" I struggled for the right word. "My reason to stop running."

His smile was watery but real. "That's very romantic."

"I have my moments."

He kissed me then—not quickly, not carefully, but the kind of kiss that didn't care who might be watching. The kind that said I love you and I'm scared and thank you for being here.

When he pulled away, Hong was watching with an expression that was half exasperation, half fondness.

"Get a room." he said.

"We did," Lego replied. "Last night."

Hong's face went through a journey I would have found hilarious if I weren't still recovering from the kiss.

"I'm leaving now," Lego said, gathering his dance bag. "Hong, promise me something?"

"What?"

"Take a break after this. After the exhibition closes, after my performance—take a break. You've been carrying so much stress for weeks. You deserve rest."

Hong's expression softened. "I promise."

"Good." Lego hugged him quickly—the particular embrace of two people who understood each other's weight. "I'll see you after. Keep P'Tui company."

And then he was gone, disappearing into the crowd, the dance bag slung over his shoulder, his posture carrying the particular determination of someone about to do something that cost.

The afternoon shortened faster than I'd expected. We stayed near Hong's exhibition, watching the crowds come and go. Hong received a few business cards—people genuinely impressed by his work, asking about commissions, about future shows, about the possibility of purchasing pieces. He accepted each card with a mixture of disbelief and barely concealed pride.

"This is really happening," he said after the third one. "People actually—they actually want to buy my art."

"Of course they do. It's beautiful."

"But it's also—" He looked at "The Real Me," at the distorted mirror, at the vulnerability made permanent in oil paint. "It's also me. They're buying pieces of me."

"That's what art is."

He was quiet for a moment. Then, softer: "I know. It's just—strange. Being seen this way. Having strangers understand things I never meant to say out loud."

I thought about Lego on stage. About the grief he'd danced, the pain he'd transformed into movement, the way his performance had made me cry in a room full of strangers. The particular bravery of being witnessed.

"It's terrifying," I agreed. "But it's also—"

"Connection."

"Yeah. Connection."

Across the gallery, I could see Est and Nut in conversation—heads bent together, voices too low to hear. There was something serious in their postures, something that suggested a conversation of significance. I wondered what they were discussing. Wondered if Est was finally processing everything he'd been through, if Nut was proving to be the kind of friend—or more—that Hong needed.

The world was shifting around us. All of us changing, growing, becoming new versions of ourselves. It was terrifying and beautiful in equal measure.

At four-thirty, I left Hong with the others and made my way backstage. The performance hall was different from the gallery—focused energy instead of diffuse contemplation. The particular tension that came before curtain. Students moved through the hallways in various stages of costume and makeup, their faces showing the particular focus of people about to perform.

I found Lego in a corner near the stage entrance.

His transformation was complete. The makeup from yesterday had been perfected—sharper lines, more dramatic shading, the kind of artistry that made him look older and otherworldly. His hair was pulled back in an elaborate style, the extensions gleaming under the backstage lights. And the costume—the red two-piece suit, the fabric that moved like liquid, the glove that extended above his elbow—made him look like something from a dream.

He was surrounded by classmates, all of them offering words of encouragement, but when he saw me, his face changed. Softened. Became the Lego I knew underneath all the performance.

He broke away from the others and crossed to me, throwing his arms around my neck in a hug that lasted longer than it probably should have.

"You came." he murmured against my shoulder.

"I told you I would."

"I know. I just—" He held on tighter. "I needed to see you. Before."

I let him hold on as long as he needed. Felt the trembling in his body that might have been nerves or exhaustion or the weight of everything he was about to do.

"After this," I said when he finally pulled back, "let's go eat something delicious. Whatever you want."

His smile was bright despite the shadows under his eyes. "That sounds perfect."

"And after all this is over—after the showcase, after the exhibition, after everything

—let's take that break we talked about. A mini vacation. Somewhere we can just be."

"I'd like that." His voice was thick with emotion. "I'd like that a lot."

"Then it's decided."

I gave him a few more words of encouragement—nothing profound, just the simple truth that I believed in him, that I would be watching, that I would be there when it was over. He listened with that particular attention he gave to things that mattered, storing my words away like the origami flowers Kevin had given him.

Then it was time.

He stepped back, and I watched him remove the knee brace—the motion quick and practiced, hiding the damaged joint beneath the red fabric of his costume before I could get a proper look. But I caught a glimpse. Just a flash of swelling, of bruising, of damage that hadn't healed.

"Lego—"

"I know." His voice was gentle but firm. "One more time. And then I rest."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tell him that no performance was worth permanently damaging himself, that the showcase would exist whether he danced or not, that his body mattered more than any choreography. But I could see it in his eyes—the determination, the need, the particular stubbornness of someone who had made a promise and intended to keep it.

"I'll be watching," I said instead. "Every second."

"I know." He kissed me quickly—just a brush of lips, careful not to smudge his stage makeup. "Find me after. No matter what happens."

"No matter what."

And then he was gone, absorbed into the chaos of backstage, transforming into the dancer who would take the stage in minutes.

I found my way back to the audience.

The performance hall was fuller than yesterday. Word had spread, apparently—about the student showcase, about the quality of the pieces, about the dancer in red who moved like grief made visible. The seats were packed, families and students and professors all gathered to witness the final night.

I found our group near the middle of the auditorium—Hong looking nervous, Nut steady beside him, Est with his camera already in his lap. Hong's sister was there too, Kevin bouncing in his seat with the particular energy of a four-year-old who

didn't fully understand what he was about to see.

"How was he?" Hong asked as I sat down.

"Ready. Nervous. Determined."

"His knee?"

"He took off the brace before I could see properly." I didn't elaborate. Didn't describe the flash of swelling, the bruising I'd glimpsed. "He promised to rest after."

Hong's expression said he believed that promise about as much as I did.

The lights dimmed.

The audience fell into anticipatory silence—conversations trailing off, bodies settling, attention gathering and focusing toward the stage. I felt my heart rate increase, the particular anxiety of watching someone you loved about to take a risk.

The curtain rose.

The music began. Lego appeared in the pool of light at center stage, the red costume catching the illumination like flame. He was completely still—that particular stillness that had struck me yesterday, the control that spoke of years of training. His face was composed, focused, already halfway into the world of the dance.

The first note built into a chord. The chord became a melody.

And Lego moved.

It was different from yesterday. I felt that immediately—the same choreography, the same story, but something had changed in the telling. Yesterday had been debut. The energy of first-time. The particular intensity of doing something that had never been done before.

Today was—Today was intention. Deliberate. Every movement considered, every gesture weighted with meaning that hadn't been there before. Lego wasn't just performing the choreography. He was interpreting it. Adding layers. Finding depths that even the original choreographer might not have intended.

He reached for something that wasn't there—that gesture I'd seen yesterday, the one that had made my heart ache. But today, the reaching was different. Longer. More desperate. The fingers grasping at empty air before slowly, painfully curling back.

The grief was the same. But today, I understood it differently.

This was about more than the choreographer's grandmother. This was about Lego.

About his sister who had died. About his parents who had left. About all the people he'd reached for who weren't there, all the love he'd offered that had been rejected or ignored.

He was dancing his own story. Hiding it inside someone else's choreography, giving himself permission to feel things he usually kept locked away.

Beside me, Est's camera clicked steadily—documenting every moment, capturing the particular beauty of someone doing what they were born to do. Hong was utterly still, his own anxiety forgotten in the face of Lego's performance.

The music built toward the sequence I remembered—the frantic part, the desperate movements, the building intensity that would lead to—

The collapse.

Lego crumpled to the stage floor. Not a fall, not an accident, but a controlled descent that looked like surrender. Like the moment when you stop fighting and let the thing you've been running from finally catch you.

Yesterday, this moment had been devastating. Today, watching it a second time, knowing it was coming, it was somehow worse. Because I could see what it cost him. Could see the particular strain in his muscles, the way his injured knee took the impact, the brief flash of pain that crossed his face before his performance mask reassembled.

He was hurting. Really hurting. And he was dancing anyway.

The silence stretched. The audience held its breath.

And then the music began to build again—that hope-finding-its-footing sound, the chord that meant survival instead of surrender.

Lego rose.

But this time, the rising was harder. I could see it in the way his body moved—the slight hesitation, the careful way he distributed his weight, the compensations he was making to protect his injured knee. The audience probably couldn't tell. But I could. I was watching with the particular attention of someone who had memorized his movements, who knew what he looked like when he was free and what he looked like when he was fighting.

He was fighting now.

The choreography continued—demanding, relentless, requiring things of his body that his body was struggling to provide. I watched him push through each sequence, watched the strain hide beneath the beauty, watched him give everything he had to a performance that was taking more than he could afford to lose.

At some point, I realized I was crying. Not the quiet tears of yesterday—something more ragged, more afraid. The particular grief of watching someone you loved hurt themselves and being unable to stop them.

The final sequence arrived.

Lego moved to center stage, the circle complete, his body carrying the weight of everything he'd just danced. He reached out one more time—that gesture, that beautiful devastating gesture—and his hand trembled visibly before he brought it to his chest.

He held the pose.

But something was wrong. I could see it even from where I was sitting—the particular quality of stillness that wasn't just performance. The way his body swayed almost imperceptibly. The sheen of sweat that was more than stage exertion.

The lights went dark.

The applause was immediate and overwhelming. People rose to their feet around me, cheering, acknowledging that something extraordinary had just happened. But I was already moving, already pushing past knees and apologizing to neighbors, already making my way toward the side exit that led backstage.

Hong was behind me. I felt him following without needing to look.

Backstage was chaos—the particular energy of a successful performance mixed with the logistical scramble of preparing for the final act of the evening. Students rushed past us in various states of costume, faculty coordinators barked instructions, families tried to navigate the narrow corridors.

"Where—" Hong started.

A girl cut through the crowd ahead of us, moving with purpose. She was carrying ice, a towel, tissues, and water—the particular collection of supplies that spoke of an emergency.

She spotted Hong. Recognition crossed her face. "Hong! Lego is this way."

We followed. She led us through the chaos, past dancers stretching for the closing number, past equipment cases and costume racks, to a corner near the back of the stage area.

Lego was on the floor. Not collapsed—not exactly. He was sitting against the wall, using a chair to rest his head instead of sitting on it, his body arranged in a way that suggested he'd lowered himself there deliberately rather than fallen. But his eyes were glazed, unfocused, and his breath was coming in ragged gasps that had nothing to do with exertion.



"Don't move him," the girl said quickly as Hong started forward. "He wasn't feeling well. I think he might faint."

Hong looked at me, his expression shifting to alarm.

I was already crouching down, already reaching for Lego's knee. The fabric of his costume resisted slightly as I pushed it aside, revealing what had been hidden during the performance.

His knee was worse than this morning. Much worse. The swelling had increased dramatically, the joint angry and red in a way that spoke of inflammation pushed far beyond safe limits. The bruising had darkened, spreading across the kneecap in shades of purple that made my stomach turn.

"Lego," I said, my voice coming out sharper than I intended. "Look at me. Can you hear me?"

His eyes found mine—slowly, with effort, like he was pulling himself back from somewhere far away.

"P'Tui." His voice was barely a whisper. "I finished it."

"I know you did." I cupped his face, forcing him to focus. "Stay with me. Don't go anywhere."

The girl was applying cold spray to his knee—the particular hiss of aerosol, the sharp chemical smell. Lego groaned but didn't protest, too exhausted to do anything but accept whatever was being done to his body. Hong handed him water. Lego drank without complaint, his hands shaking too badly to hold the bottle steady.

"Here." The girl pressed a packet of gummy bears into Lego's palm. "Sugar. Your blood sugar is probably crashing. You need to eat something."

Lego looked at the candy like he didn't understand what it was.

"Eat it," I said. "Please."

He ate. Slowly, mechanically, each gummy bear an effort.

"You should go to the doctor, Lego," the girl said gently. "This knee needs proper attention. Not just ice and compression."

Lego was quiet for a long moment. I watched the realization move across his face—the understanding that he had pushed too hard, that his body had finally reached its limit, that there would be consequences for what he'd done.

"I'll go," he said finally, his voice small. "Sorry. Thank you."

The girl stroked his arm—a gesture of genuine care, the particular tenderness of

someone who understood what he'd sacrificed. "Don't worry, that's what we're here for. But please, go to the doctor. I'll leave it to you."

She dusted herself off and disappeared into the crowd, leaving us alone with the wreckage of Lego's performance.

The emergency room was quiet for a Sunday evening. That was the only blessing—the relative calm of the waiting area, the quick triage that had gotten Lego into an examination room within minutes of our arrival. Nut had driven us, his car carrying five people with injuries and worry distributed among them. Est had come too, his camera abandoned at the university, his attention focused entirely on being present.

We waited.

The chairs in the waiting room were hard plastic, designed for endurance rather than comfort. Hong sat beside me, his leg bouncing with nervous energy. Nut was on his other side, a steady presence. Est had found a quiet corner, his expression showing the particular focus of someone processing difficult things.

"He's going to be okay." Hong said. Not a question—more like a statement he was trying to make true by saying it out loud.

"He's going to be okay." I agreed.

But the words felt hollow. We'd seen his knee. We'd seen the swelling, the bruising, the damage that weeks of overwork had accumulated. This wasn't the kind of thing that would heal overnight. This was the kind of thing that could have consequences. I thought about Lego's face as we'd helped him to Nut's car. The way he'd apologized repeatedly, even as his body trembled with exhaustion. The tears that had threatened to spill but hadn't quite—held back by some final reserve of strength.

He blamed himself. Of course he did. He blamed himself for the emergency room visit, for the worry on our faces, for the disruption to everyone's evening. Even now, even when he was the one suffering, he was more concerned about the inconvenience he was causing to others. That was Lego. That had always been Lego. The boy who believed he had to earn love by being useful. Who thought that any burden he placed on others would be grounds for abandonment.

I was going to spend the rest of my life proving him wrong.

The door to the examination area opened. Lego emerged, followed by a doctor who was explaining something about rest and ice and physical therapy. He was wearing a new knee brace—larger than before, more serious-looking, the kind of medical equipment that suggested this injury was being taken properly seriously. In his arms, he carried a paper bag of medication.

He thanked the doctor with the particular politeness of someone raised to be gracious even when exhausted. Then he walked toward us, his gait uneven, his body favoring the injured leg.

"I'm sorry," he said before any of us could speak. "We ended up here because of me. I ruined the whole evening. You should all be at dinner, or celebrating, or—"

"Stop," Hong said, cutting him off. "Just stop."

Lego's face crumpled.

"It's okay, Shorty." Hong's voice was gentler now. "But I'd appreciate it if we could go to dinner. I'm starving, and the hospital cafeteria looked deeply suspicious."

Lego laughed—a wet, broken sound that transformed almost immediately into crying. Not the quiet tears he usually hid. Real crying, the kind that shook his whole body, that made him gasp for breath between sobs. The accumulated weight of everything—the weeks of overwork, the pain he'd hidden, the fear he'd carried, the guilt he felt for needing care—all of it releasing at once.

Hong caught him. Pulled him close. Rocked him gently the way you'd comfort a child.

"I'm sorry," Lego kept saying, the words muffled against Hong's shoulder. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"It's okay," Hong murmured. "We've got you. We're not going anywhere."

I watched them—my friend holding the person I loved, both of them broken in their own ways, finding comfort in each other. And I felt something shift in my chest.

This was chosen family. Not the grand gestures, not the dramatic declarations. Just this: showing up. Holding on. Catching each other when the weight became too much to carry alone.

"Don't say sorry again." Hong pulled back, holding Lego at arm's length. "Say 'thank you for being here' instead."

Lego sniffed, wiping his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Thank you for being here."

We went to dinner. Not to a hospital cafeteria, and not to any of the fast food places that would have been convenient. Nut drove us to a proper restaurant—a quiet place with good food and low lighting and the kind of atmosphere that allowed for exhaustion and tears and difficult conversations.

Lego's crying had subsided by the time we were seated. His eyes were swollen, his face blotchy, but there was something lighter in his expression. Something that looked almost like relief.

"The doctor said it's not as bad as it looks," he said, gesturing to the new knee brace. "Severe strain, not a tear. Six weeks of reduced activity, physical therapy, and I should be fine."

"Six weeks." I repeated.

"It could have been worse." He met my eyes. "It almost was. If I'd pushed through one more performance—"

"But you didn't."

"Because my body gave me no choice." He looked down at his hands. "I should have listened earlier. Should have stopped when it started hurting. Instead I just—kept going. Like I always do."

"That stops now," Hong said firmly. "No more sacrificing yourself for other people's art. No more hiding when you're hurt. No more pretending you're fine when you're falling apart."

"I—"

"Promise us." Hong's voice cracked slightly. "Promise me, Lego. I can't watch you do this to yourself anymore."

Lego was quiet for a long moment. When he looked up, his eyes were wet again—not crying, but close.

"I promise," he said. "I promise I'll try."

"That's all we ask." I reached across the table and took his hand. "That's all anyone can ask."

The food arrived—plates of comfort and warmth, the particular pleasure of good food after a difficult day. We ate slowly, conversation drifting from topic to topic. The exhibition. The performance. The plans for tomorrow and the day after and all the ordinary days that would follow.

Est talked about his photography—the campaign he was working on, the joy he'd rediscovered in documenting beautiful things. Hong talked about the business cards he'd received, the possibility of future commissions, the terrifying and wonderful reality of being an artist whose work was wanted.

Nut was quiet but present, his hand finding Hong's under the table, his attention steady and sure.

And Lego—Lego was quiet too. But it was a different kind of quiet. Not the brightness dimmed by exhaustion, not the sunshine masked by pain. Just—peace. The particular calm of someone who had finally stopped running.

"I keep thinking about the performance," he said eventually, during a lull in the conversation. "About the dance. The story it was telling."

"The grief." I said.

"Yeah. The grief. The reaching for something that isn't there." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "For so long, I thought that was my story. Reaching and reaching and never finding. But tonight—" He looked around the table. At Hong and Nut and Est. At me. "Tonight I realized I wasn't reaching anymore. Because I'd already found it."

"Found what?" Est asked.

"Everything." Lego's smile was small but real. "Family. Love. People who show up and stay. People who carry you to emergency rooms and buy you dinner and don't leave just because you're too much trouble."

"You're not too much trouble." I said immediately.

"I know." His voice was soft. "I'm starting to actually know it. For the first time in my life."

The table was quiet for a moment. Then Hong lifted his glass—water, not alcohol, because we were all too exhausted for anything else.

"To chosen family," he said. "To showing up and staying. To catching each other when we fall."

We clinked glasses. Drank. Let the moment settle into memory.

Outside, the night was velvet-dark and scattered with stars. Bangkok's light pollution usually washed out most of the sky, but something about tonight was different. Clearer. The stars were visible—points of light against the darkness, distant and beautiful and somehow closer than they usually seemed.

We stood in the restaurant parking lot, none of us quite ready to separate.

"We should go," Hong said reluctantly. "Tomorrow's Monday. Real life returns."

"Not for me," Lego said. "Doctor's orders. A week of rest."

"Lucky bastard."

"You want my knee injury?"

"Point taken."

They left first—Nut's car pulling away, Hong waving through the window until they disappeared around the corner. Est lingered for a moment. He looked at me, at Lego

leaning against my side, at the particular picture we made in the starlight.

"I'm glad you found each other," he said. "Both of you. You deserve this."

"So do you," Lego said. "You deserve everything good."

"I'm working on it." Est's smile was genuine. "Seeing you two—it helps. Reminds me what it looks like. Healthy love. Chosen family."

He left too, calling a taxi rather than walking, his figure disappearing into the Bangkok night.

And then it was just us.

Lego and me. Standing under the stars. The weight of the day settling around us like a blanket.

"Take me home?" Lego asked.

"Your place or mine?"

"Yours. If that's okay." He smiled up at me. "I like waking up with you."

So I took him home. Nut had offered to drive us, but we'd declined—the night was beautiful and the walk wasn't far and there was something healing about moving through the quiet streets together. Lego's gait was uneven, his injured knee protesting every step, but he didn't complain. Just held my hand and let me set a slow pace.

"I was thinking," he said as we walked.

"About what?"

"About what Hong said. Earlier. About making it official."

My heart did something complicated in my chest. "You heard that?"

"I was standing right there." He glanced up at me, his expression unreadable in the streetlight. "Were you thinking about it? Before he said anything?"

"I—" I took a breath. Let it out. "I've been thinking about it for weeks. Months, maybe. Since before I was willing to admit what this was."

"What is this?"

"Everything." The word came out before I could second-guess it. "You're everything, Lego. The person I want to wake up with and fall asleep with and spend all the ordinary days with. The person I want to take care of, even when you make that difficult. The person I—"

I stopped walking. Turned to face him properly.

"I love you. I've been in love with you for longer than I was willing to admit. And I don't want to keep pretending this is casual or undefined or whatever we've been calling it."

His eyes were very bright in the darkness.

"Are you—" He hesitated. "Are you asking me something?"

"I'm asking you to be my boyfriend." The word felt strange in my mouth—too juvenile for the depth of what I felt, too simple for the complexity of what we'd built. "Officially. Publicly. In whatever way matters to you."

Lego was quiet for so long that I started to worry. Then his face crumpled into a smile so radiant it hurt to look at.

"Yes," he said. "Obviously yes. A million times yes."

He launched himself at me—careful of his knee, but not careful of anything else. His arms wrapped around my neck, his body pressed against mine, his face finding its familiar place against my shoulder.

"I've been waiting for you to ask," he admitted. "For months. But I didn't want to push. I knew you were scared, knew you had reasons, knew you needed to figure it out for yourself."

"I'm done being scared."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I pulled back enough to see his face. "From now on, I'm just going to be brave. With you. For you."

He kissed me. Not quickly, not carefully. The kind of kiss that said finally and yes and this is what I've been waiting for. The kind of kiss that made the world narrow to just the two of us, standing on a quiet street corner, the stars scattered overhead like witnesses.

"Boyfriend," Lego said, testing the word.

"Boyfriend," I confirmed.

"I like how that sounds."

"Me too."

We walked the rest of the way home in comfortable silence, hands linked, steps synchronized. My apartment was waiting—warm and familiar, full of the evidence of

ordinary life. But it felt different now. Fuller. Like it had been waiting for someone to fill it, and someone finally had.

We got ready for bed slowly. Lego took his medication—anti-inflammatories, pain relievers, the particular cocktail the doctor had prescribed. I made tea—chamomile again, because it was becoming our ritual, because rituals mattered. We climbed into bed together. Lego curled against my side immediately, his body finding its place against mine like a key fitting a lock.

"Tomorrow," he murmured, already half-asleep.

"Tomorrow we rest. Together. For as long as we need."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

His breathing slowed. The particular rhythm of someone surrendering to sleep, letting exhaustion finally claim them. I lay awake for a while longer, staring at the ceiling, feeling him breathe against me.

Everything had changed. Everything was different. And somehow, impossibly, it was all better than anything I'd allowed myself to imagine.

The night was quiet around us. The city hummed its distant song. And somewhere in the darkness, the stars continued their ancient dance—indifferent to our small human dramas, but beautiful nonetheless.

I closed my eyes.

Tomorrow would bring its own challenges. More healing for Lego's knee. More processing for everyone's hearts. The ongoing, unglamorous work of building a life together. But tonight Tonight there was just this: warmth and closeness and the particular peace that came from finally being exactly where you were supposed to be.

Boyfriend.

The word echoed in my mind as sleep finally claimed me.

It sounded like a beginning.